

Charter schools offer a choice

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Byline: Engler, John

Body

Charter schools offer a choice.

The number of charter schools in Michigan continues to grow, offering additional educational choices for parents and their children.

Detroit has led the way in the number of charter schools. Nine are open this school year, offering Detroit public school students another option. Two more charter schools are expected to open in the city when the new school year starts.

Michigan's two latest charter schools, which will open in August, exemplify the way these public schools approach education in innovative ways.

In Dearborn last month, I joined Ford officials and educators to announce the creation of the Henry Ford Academy of Manufacturing Arts and Sciences at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village.

This public school academy represents a new way of combining education, job skills and creativity. The Henry Ford Academy will begin preparing 100 ninth graders for college, skilled-trade apprenticeships and jobs by combining hands-on learning with emerging technology. The rigorous curriculum will focus on the application of math, science, humanities and problem-solving in a real world context.

A few days after visiting the site of the Henry Ford Academy, I joined officials from the Edison Project who announced their plans to charter a school at the former campus of the Michigan School for the Blind in Lansing. The Mid-Michigan Public School Academy, a K-5 school, is expecting some 690 students to attend here at the start of the school year.

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The Edison Project, which will operate the new school, is a nationally recognized organization dedicated to infusing creativity, responsibility and accountability, and parental and community involvement into public schools. The academy will feature a longer school year, longer school days and high teaching standards to ensure that students receive a world-class education.

The Mid-Michigan Public School Academy will draw students from across Lansing and will help revitalize the area around the School for the Blind campus. The academy, with its distinctive location, is expected to serve as a national model for charter schools.

The good news is that these schools will be serving the children who need them the most - children at risk and children who need extra help to achieve the American dream.

These two new charter public schools, like those before them, offer more choice to parents and students. Already, five trade academies and 43 charter public schools have opened in Michigan since 1993. More importantly, thousands of young men and women are receiving a high-quality, innovative education that is uniquely tailored to their needs.

Here are some interesting facts about Michigan's charter public schools:

- * More than 5,300 charter school students are learning in creative new environments.
- * In addition to the 43 charter public schools already open, another 40 schools have been authorized, and charter school enrollment is expected to climb to nearly 7,500 by the fall.
- * The pupil-teacher ratio for Michigan's charter schools is 16:1, compared to 22:1 in traditional public schools.
- * Average charter school size is about 130 students, compared to more than 450 in traditional public schools.
- * Two out of three charter public school students came from other public schools, while one out of three either came from a non-public school or entered school for the first time (kindergarten).
- * In charter schools, about 46 percent of students are White and approximately 50 percent are Black, with the balance Hispanic or Native American. In contrast, traditional public schools are 78 percent White and 17 percent Black.

Interestingly, both the Henry Ford Museum and the Edison Project have connections to the famed inventor Thomas Edison. Working at his laboratory one

day, Edison was asked about company rules. Edison's reply: "There ain't no rules around here. We're trying to accomplish something."

That's what charter public schools are all about: eliminating burdensome rules, breaking down barriers, freeing teachers to do what they do best - teach.

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